

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A FOCUS ON KOGI STATE 2011 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

S.M. Omodia, PhD

Reader, Department of political sciences, Kogi State University, Nigeria

Abstract

This research work unfolds party politics and the challenge of free and fair elections in Nigeria with specific focus on Kogi State 2011 gubernatorial election. The paper through the understanding of the typologies of political culture and political participation as frame work of analysis focuses on the concepts: political mobilization and education, party primaries and interparty contest as units of analysis for discussing the Nigerian electoral process. The paper thus argued that the low turnout of electorates during elections which was less than 50% of registered voters during the Kogi State gubernatorial election is an indication of the poor mobilization and educative function of political parties which poses a major challenge to free and fair elections. The paper further stated that, party primaries in the Nigerian state, especially in major political parties as manifested in Kogi State is often characterized by electoral manipulation and thereby adversely affecting aggregative function of political parties. This tends to have a far reaching implication on interparty contest as political environment in most cases is charged with divisiveness, party indiscipline, thuggery, ballot box snatching to mention a few. As a result, the paper recommend an enduring mobilization and education process by political parties which is anchored on the grassroots as means of acquiring support for the political system. This is coupled with the need to restructure political parties to be integrative of the people by encompassing people of like minds rather than been viewed as platforms for political contest.

Keywords: Electoral process, interparty contest, political culture, political mobilization, party primaries, political participation.

Introduction

Conducting free, fair and credible elections in an emerging democracy such as Nigeria has been viewed as a challenging process that demand functional input from democratic institutions such as the political parties, the electoral body, the electorates as well as the political entities whose activities are geared towards controlling the machinery of government (Omodia, 2011_a). Free and fair elections has also seen viewed as the mechanism that oils the democratic process which enables for democratic stability, and maturity (Ibodje and Dode 2007; Omodia 2011_a). From the perspective of this paper, relating the first conception of free and fair elections to the latter as stated above, is indicative of the fact that although functional inputs are needed from political elites, the electoral body, electorates, political parties and in the Nigerian environment, to a great extent security agents, it is important to note that the structure, pattern and functioning of political parties tend to affect the institutions mentioned above. According to Omodia (2009) the structure of political parties: masses, elitist/cadre and mass-elite could vividly impact on the freeness and fairness of the electoral process in that: an elitist dominated process would lead to excessive monetization of the electoral process, experience the manipulation of the masses by the political elites for selfish and class benefits, an ineffective and restrictive political mobilization of the citizenry for voter registration and enhanced political participation in voting, a non issue based political education that will not enable the electorate to make informed electoral decisions among others.

The implication therefore is that it is important to accentuate that, the role of political parties in a competitive environment is of utmost importance to ensuring free and fair elections. This is because parties are expected to regulate the activities of their members by ensuring that they keep to rules specified by electoral body for hygienic contest. This is coupled with such other functions as; political mobilization and education of electorate, instilling confidence in the electoral process through an open and transparent conduct of party primaries, making sure that parties are represented at polling booths and collation centres by party agents among others.

Thus, the focus of paper is to unfold the role of political parties in enhancing free and fair elections in Nigeria with specific focus on Kogi State Gubernatorial Election of 2011. In order to effectively achieve this focus, this paper in addition to the introduction, theoretical framework intend to look at such issues as: political mobilization and education, the conduct of party primaries as well as inter party protest.

1.Framework of Analysis

Political culture as a tool of analysis is quite indispensable for the understanding of electoral behaviour and the workings of political parties. This is because the type of political culture manifested by the people of a state to a large extent determines the level of political participation vis-a-vis, whether such participation would be functional or dysfunctional. As regard political culture, the typology that comes to mind is Almond and verba's. This, typology discusses political culture from the perspective of: parochial, subject and participant political culture (Almond and verba, 1963).

While in the parochial political culture the citizen has a dim understanding of political system; in the subject type, the understanding of the political system is viewed as the gap between political leaders and the masses. In other words, the people view governance as a process which is not integrative of the people. The participant political culture just like the name suggest is the type that is fully integrative of the people and the implication is high level political participation.

When the concept above is related to partyism vis-à-vis electoral process, it shows that where parochial culture exists, the political elites tend to dominate the party system and the electoral process because the utility of the process is not captured by the people. In the subject type, the utility of the process is captured by the people, but they are not well integrated into the party cum electoral process; that is, even when the people are members of political parties, their membership do not actually count in determining electoral success because their votes are designed not to count.

Similarly, Omodia (2011_b) identifies three types of political participation. These are: (i) minimal elitist political participation (ii) massive political participation (iii) integrative political participation. As regard minimal elitist, the conception is anchored on the determination of political structure and governance by the elites based on a process that is exclusive of the masses. According to Omodia (2011_b), this scenario is most visible in

developing countries, in that even in a democracy, democratic institutions its function and participation to a great extent is subject to the manipulation of the elites.

Massive political on the other hand, is a form of political participation which is a function of the choice of the masses. That is, it is the masses driven. This ideally is practiced in the Athenian City state (mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 1999), integrative political participation therefore, is a function of the integration of both minimal elitist and massive political participation in the sense that even when there are political elites, the political cum democratic mechanisms for throwing-up political leaders are masses determined.

The utility of the above identified typologies of political culture and political participation is anchored on the conception that just as political participation could aid in determining the structure and operation of political parties, the parties could as a matter of fact manifest democratic tenets or lack of it depending on the political culture that exist in the state, the above therefore, constitute perspective for understanding political parties and the challenge of free and fair elections in Nigeria with specific focus on Kogi State from the angle of political mobilization and education, party primaries and inter-party contest.

2. Discussion and Analysis

2.1 Political Mobilization and Education

Although, political mobilization and political education are often used interchangeably or as synonyms. The focus of this paper especially as regard the utilization of the concepts as unit of analysis is based on the need to distinguish between both concepts. As a matter of fact, on a manifest level, especially In the Nigeria state, it is common to see the people politically mobilized for political participation without the necessary political cum democratic institutions equipping them with functional education that will aid the development of the system.

This no doubt could be attributed to the pattern or method of political mobilization being utilized in the Nigeria state. Thus one could vividly state that there is a sharp distinction between political mobilization and education just as one could say that the two concepts are interwoven in the term of activity. For instance, an effective political education could lead to enhanced political mobilization because when the people are well informed and convinced of the benefits of their involvement in the political process, such conviction will serve as a mechanism of mobilization (Almond et. al, 2000). Thus, political education is viewed as integrative of political mobilization.

Conversely, the people could be persuasively mobilized to participate in a political process, but in such participation political education may be lacking to the extent that mobilization does not impact qualitatively on the political process. This could be said to be synonymous with the Nigerian scenario based on the method of mobilization which is persuasive and not convincing on the part of the people. The method includes:

- i. A favoured political campaign method which focuses more on political debates, the use of jingles in the media at the expense of face to face or one to one form of campaign.
- ii. Intimidation and politicization of the use of voter's card as a requirement for school enrolment and payment of salaries of civil servants. The implication therefore is that the acquisition of voter's card and participation in voter registration exercise is done with the intention of meeting up with the requirement for either the payment of salary or for school enrolment if demanded by government.
- iii. Based on (ii) above, one could then argue that political mobilization is more of government propelled rather than party propelled and this could be attributed to the low level of turn out during elections. On observational basis, in the 2011 gubernatorial election in Kogi state, the above identified method was manifest in the electoral process in term of political participation. For instance, out of the 1, 325,272 registered voters only 518, 949 electorates voted, indicating a voter turnout of less than 50% of the total number of registered voters (Nigerian Tribune, 2011). Apart from the nature or method of political mobilization which is anchored on persuasive mobilization. Other factors that may have accounted for the low level of political mobilization during the December 3 gubernatorial election in Kogi state also include: the excessive militarization of the environment with the view of providing security to voters, lost confidence in the process through previous experience which was characterised by thugery, ballot box snatching to mention a few (Oddih 2007; Aper 2008; Bello 2011).

On political education, it is important to accentuate that this functional input could best be provided by political parties and this could be effectively done in an atmosphere where party members are made to feel as major stakeholders in the parties (Olujide 2010; Omodia 2010). In other words, when parties are masses based and to a great extent ruled by party dues, members would be fully integrated into party processes and programmes including political education on what the party stand for, the party logo, the choice of the

logo, how to vote and how not to waste their votes and therefore be able to sell these principles and electoral education to others who though are not party members but are sympathetic to their cause. This form of education at present exist inform of minimal political culture in the Nigeria state and this account for why votes are often nullified during elections. For instance, in the just concluded December 3, 2011 gubernatorial election in Kogi state, out of the 518, 949 votes, 484, 168 of the votes were valid while 34,781 votes were nullified. (Nigerian Tribune, 2011).

Although this number (34, 781) could be said to be insufficient considering the fact that winner Idris Wada of People's Democratic Party (PDP) got 300, 372 votes when compared to the 159, 913 votes of Abubakar Audu from Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) who was the closest to the declared winner (Nigerian Tribune, 2011). It is of immense importance to say that on observational basis, the number could have been more than the total nullified votes if not for assisted votes where polling assistants had to aid uneducated and uniformed electorates in voting the party of their choice through the mentioning of the party or candidate. Of utmost importance is the fact that the assist was abused by the polling assistants in favour of their preferred candidates and parties hereby undermining the fairness of the process.

3.2 Party Primaries

Party primaries are indispensable mechanisms which defines the internal democratic process of the emergence of party candidates. As a matter of fact, the democratic cum electoral culture of political parties could be measured based on the internal electoral processes leading to the emergence of candidates. These processes are indispensable to the freeness and fairness at both intra and interparty elections in that it could either aid to instil confidence in the electoral process and thereby, enhance political participation and development or disadvantaged the process through lack of confidence in the system and thus witnessing political apathy that threatens the survival of democratic governance in a fragile polity.

In the Nigerian state of the fourth republic, party primaries especially in the major Political parties- People's Democratic Party (PDP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Progressive Great Alliance (APGA) tend to be keenly contested and in most cases tend to snowball into scenario where the processes leading to the emergence of candidates are often challenged in courts (Isa and Zakari, 2008).

In minor political parties however, the scenario is more of an adoption of a single candidate as consensus candidate. And in most cases, the consensus candidate of the different political parties are attracted from the major ones with the purpose of providing them the platform for contesting elections when they lose out of the internal contest leading to the emergence of candidates in the major ones.

Based on the cross-carpeting of party members for the purpose of having a platform for seeking elective offices, the point is that this scenario is often propelled by the dissatisfaction with the process leading to the emergence of party candidates in major political parties. In other words, party primaries in the Nigerian political parties, especially the major ones, though keenly contested, but the processes are in most cases not free and fair (Tenuche, 2011)

In Kogi state for example, the emergence of Idris Wada as PDP candidate of the September 22, 2011 party primaries for the December 3, 2011 gubernatorial election was challenged by the winner of the January 2011 party primary (Jibrin Isah) and his supporters based majorly on the followings;

- a. The earlier emergence of Jibrin Isah as the PDP candidate from the January 2011 party primary exercise for the April 26 gubernatorial election that was barred by court judgement and subsequently fixed for December 3, 2011 by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Jibrin Isah and his supporters strongly felt that the party should have should simply honoured the earlier submission made to INEC in which he was presented as the party candidate instead of the leader of the party in the state, Governor Ibrahim Idris anointing another candidate through a cosmetic party primary in September 22, 2011.
- b. That Idris Wada, the declared winner of the September 22, 2011 party primary was not a card carrying member of the party as at the time he was invited to contest party primary.
- c. The electoral process was fraudulent as a result of the manipulation of delegates' lists in favour of Idris Wada the governor's anointed candidate.

The implication of the above is that the PDP was like a house divided against itself and this could have affected its capacity to fully mobilize both party members and non-members to come out and vote for its candidate in December 3, 2011 election although the party was able to win by securing 300,372 votes out of the 484,168 valid votes (Nigerian Tribune 2011).

At this juncture, one could convincingly say that party primaries especially in the Nigerian state constitute a major challenge to free and fair elections in that the process for the emergence of party candidates is often characterised by the manipulation of the process by the incumbent in favour of his preferred candidates during contest, or in favour of himself when contesting. This no doubt tends to have far reaching implication on inter-party electoral contest.

3.3 Inter Party Contest

The manipulations and divisions within the PDP arising from the September 22 primary election created two major manifestations during the December 3, 2011 gubernatorial elections:

- I. There were pockets of thuggery and sporadic shouting in Dekina Local Government Area which was the local government of the declared winners ,of the January 2011 PDP primary (Jibrin Isah) April 26, aborted gubernatorial elections and declared winner of the September 22, 2011 PDP primary (Idris Wada) who emerge as the party candidate for the December 3, gubernatorial election. Although this factor could not be said to be the singular factor that propelled electoral vices in the area during the elections but there is no doubt that there were manifestations of the party indiscipline by supporters of Jibrin Isah to manipulate the process in favour of the opposition ACN in some wards of the local government in order to pay for the non-emergence of their principal Jibrin Isah as the party candidate (Nigerian Tribune 2011)
- II. It also create impression especially by the opposition members that the PDP under the leadership of the incumbent Governor- Ibrahim Idris, was bent on manipulating the electoral process in favour of anointed candidate Idris Wada, based on his emergence and therefore set a stage for the rejection of results especially if PDP is declared winner of the gubernatorial election (Bello, 2011)

Thus, the election which was characterised by accusations and counter accusations by majorly the PDP and ACN, was contested by 19 political parties with PDP emerging as the winner with 300, 372 votes while the ACN secured 159, 913 votes to emerge as the closest to the PDP. Although the electoral process was believed not to be free and fair by the opposition ACN who described the machination of PDP in electoral manipulation during the exercise as “Scientific Rigging” (Nigerian Tribune 2011). This is coupled with the interim statement of the Election working Group that:

presiding officers and polling clerk had difficulties conveying electoral materials from ward distribution centres to polling units due to lack of mobility, adding that some of the party agents behave in a manner that was inconsistent with the conduct of free, fair and transparent election.....it also noted that there were identified cases of electoral malpractices, such as ballot snatching and intimidation of electoral officers (Nigerian Tribune 2011, P.2).

Conversely, the identified challenges and electoral vices notwithstanding, the election was believed to be a reflection of the wishes of the people. Hypothetically, one could state that the following factors may have accounted for the outcome of December 3, 2011 election in favour of the PDP:

- i. The movement of Prince Abubakar Audu formally of the ANPP to ACN who had little or no structure in the state because of the sectional nature of the party as a party associated with the south western zone of Nigeria.
- ii. The newness of the party in the state which is in the North central zone of Nigeria.
- iii. The involvement of the presidency in reconciling the differences arising from the September 22, 2011 party primary before gubernatorial election which may have cemented the division in the party to an extent.

3. Towards Free and Fair Elections

This paper has basically looked at free and fair elections in Nigeria with specific focus on Kogi state from functional perspective of political mobilization and education, the conduct of party primaries for the purpose of instilling confidence in the electoral process as well as the fairness of inter-party contest. Thus, the mechanisms for enhancing free and fair elections in the Nigerian state with specific focus on the role of political parties would be anchored on the above stated factors.

As regards mobilization and political education it is important to stress that it should be an integral part of the party system. This is because democratic development could be viewed as synonymous to electoral transformation and maturity of the people as pertains high level political participation, informed political decisions and people structured political system which to a great extent must be embedded in the party system. In other words political mobilization and education by political parties should be an ongoing activity which is not restricted to election periods. As a matter of fact, political mobilization and education should encompass a process whereby policy decisions could emanate from the grassroots through party structure as well as a device through which party members are fully aware of governmental decisions, policy alternatives, as well as the reasons why policies should be supported or otherwise. These processes no doubt would make the people to be well informed as regard electoral decisions during elections.

On party primaries and inter party contest, a scenario where parties are not parties in actual sense of the word, but exist as platform of political contest, the implication is that electoral processes within and without the political parties are likely not going to be free and fair. Therefore, for party primaries to be free and fair there is need for political parties in the Nigerian state to be restructured in such a way that parties would encompass people of like minds and the aggregative mechanism of the party structure is functional to the extent that party positions are integrative of the people. This could be achieved when parties are people oriented in formation, operation and goal rather than being elitist and excessively monetized in operation.

4.Conclusion

This research paper has been able to situate the role of political parties in enhancing free and fair elections in the Nigerian state with specific focus on Kogi state. The argument of the paper is that political parties are well placed in enabling functional inputs into the electoral system through political mobilization and education-which would aid electorates to make informed political decisions or through a well functioning aggregative mechanism that would check dysfunctional politicking.

In other words, the paper stresses the hyphen and buckle between the nature and quality of political mobilization and education vis-a-vis the nature of intra or inter-party electoral contest that tend to exist in the state.

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